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**Instrumentalism amongst students: a cross-national comparison of the significance of subject choice.**

Dr Esther Muddiman

*School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales*

38 Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3BB, Email: [MuddimanEK@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:MuddimanEK@cardiff.ac.uk)

# **Instrumentalism amongst students: a cross-national comparison of the significance of subject choice**

Both educational policies and academic literature assume that students take an instrumental approach to their studies at university. However, despite wide-ranging discussions in the academic literature about contemporary arrangements and practices in higher education, empirical examinations of these conditions are notably scarce. This paper reports on a comparative qualitative study into undergraduate students' accounts of studying Business or Sociology at universities in Britain and Singapore. Drawing on Eric Fromm's distinction between learning as 'having' and 'being, the paper demonstrates that - regardless of national context - those studying Business displayed many elements of passive, instrumentalised, or 'having' orientations to learning, whilst those studying Sociology showed clear signs of the more active and less instrumental 'being' mode of learning. By examining subject allegiance across national borders, this paper underscores the importance of recognising subject choice, alongside other important contextual factors, in moving towards a nuanced understanding of student dispositions.

## **Introduction**

The view that students take an instrumental approach to their studies at university is visible in both academic literature and contemporary educational policies shaping HE provision. It is widely understood that trends of massification and financialisation have re-configured the role of HEIs around the world, and that universities have an increasingly important role to play in the economic successes of both individuals and nations (Brown et al. 2011). A growing number of scholars have expressed concern about these trends, visible in raised tuition fees, rankings, student surveys and marketing strategies (McGettigan 2013, Evans 2005, Beverungen et al. 2013), and have suggested that acting together under the umbrella of neoliberalism, they encourage students to approach their studies as consumers (Budd 2016). It is argued that an emphasis on employability and credentialism is reflected in more instrumental approaches to

learning and a transformation of the student experience. However, despite ongoing debates in the academic literature stretching back over twenty years (e.g. Ransom 1993), empirical explorations of student dispositions are relatively limited, and tend to focus on the mediating role of social class background or type of institution (e.g. Ball *et al.* 2002, Ashwin *et al.* 2014).

This paper addresses the under-analysis of the role of subject choice in understanding student dispositions. Drawing on empirical evidence, it counteracts widespread assumptions of instrumentalism amongst university students to demonstrate that student dispositions are not always the same, and that subject allegiance plays an important mediating role. Semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students studying either Business or Sociology in both the UK and Singapore (n=40) revealed that subject allegiances were more prominent than national context in distinguishing students' accounts of their learning and experiences at university. Applying Fromm's (1979) distinction between learning as 'having' and 'being', this paper demonstrates how, whilst those studying Business displayed many elements of passive instrumentalised, or 'having' orientations to learning, those studying Sociology showed clear signs of the more active and less instrumental 'being' mode of learning. The paper begins by situating the study in literature on HE and student experiences, and underscoring the rationale of undertaking a comparative study. This leads to a description of the theoretical and methodological framework, after which the findings are presented and discussed. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of understanding students' accounts of their university experiences and learning practices in terms of subject allegiance, alongside other important contextual factors.

## **Context**

### ***The massification of Higher Education***

The proportion of young people going to university has been steadily rising as governments around the world have implemented policies to widen access to HE. The premium placed on ‘education, training and other sources of knowledge’ has become increasingly prominent and has extended beyond formal schooling to encompass an idea of ‘lifelong learning’ (Becker 2002:293). Indeed, at the turn of the century the OECD warned that the prospects for those who do not invest in their own human capital would be ever more limited (2001). As a result of this reconceptualization, it is claimed that universities have become an even more important arbiter of individual status and success (Brown *et al.* 2011). There have been a number of key changes to how universities are organised, with the sector ‘becoming larger, more financially oriented and less publically funded than before’ (Budd 2016:1, see also Marginson 2004). The application of neoliberal trends has been particularly visible in England (Nixon *et al.* 2016): the Browne Review of HE in 2010 prompted the introduction of top-up tuition fees and cemented the concept that the individual is the main beneficiary of higher education through enhanced lifetime earnings. The preoccupation with certification is also apparent in the governmental focus on tackling barriers to graduate employment through careers advice, work experience and the development of soft skills (BIS 2016).

A range of authors have discussed the implications of changing arrangements in higher education in parts of Europe and the United States; their contributions can be organised into four thematic areas – entrepreneurship, commodification, marketization, and externalising quality control. Firstly, the increasingly ‘entrepreneurial’ role of universities (Barnett 1997) can be seen in corporate behaviour including self-conscious university branding, international student recruitment drives, and partnerships with

industry (Evans 2005, Beverungen et al. 2013). It is also visible in practices of funding academic departments according to how profitable they are perceived to be, and how much those graduating from them will contribute to the future economy (McGettigan 2013). Secondly, raised tuition fees, symptomatic of the ‘user-pays’ model of funding, also mean that students are increasingly constituted as consumers of educational products (Beverungen *et al.* 2013; Miller 1998; Tomlinson 2017). Thirdly, in order to survive, universities are positioned in competition with one another in the market for students, research grants, and national and international rankings (McGettigan 2013). And fourthly, the prioritisation of economic imperatives is reflected in changes to the quality assurance systems used to monitor educational provision at universities, increasingly focussing on the interests of external stakeholders (employers, prospective students and professional bodies) rather than students and frontline staff (Becket and Brookes 2005). Of course, it is important to remember that these broad trends are not representative of all nation states, who may be more or less able to resist neoliberal pressures (indeed, students in some countries do not pay tuition fees at all).

### ***Critiques of instrumentality***

A number of possible costs to the contemporary character of HEIs have been identified by critics in terms of: research and the reconceptualization of knowledge (Barnett 1997, Holmwood 2011), teaching and the wellbeing of university staff (Morrissey 2015, Ball 2012), and the experiences of students (Nixon *et al.* 2016). It is to this last dimension that this paper attends. The economic or functional critiques of instrumental learning are well-documented. As we have seen, the idea that graduates can command higher salaries has been used to justify tuition fees, and to reframe a university degree as an ‘investment in the self’ (Marginson 2006). However, the universal validity of the ‘graduate premium’ has been called into question on account that it varies according to

both degree subject and institution (Chevalier and Conlon 2003; Carnevale *et al.* 2012). Equally, if the supply of graduates outstrips demand, graduate earnings are suppressed and become polarised (Brown et al. 2011). Therefore, a system that frames the purpose of higher education as an employability exercise and encourages instrumentalism may contribute to frustrated expectations or anomie (Durkheim 1964) amongst graduates. Complementing these functional critiques, is the idea that inducing instrumental and consumerised relationships between universities and their students will re-frame knowledge away from a progressive, collective resource, towards a source of competitive individual advantage that will undermine the transformative (Watson 2012) emancipatory (Nixon et al. 2016) or civic potential of higher learning (Holmwood 2011, Olin Wright 2010, Nussbaum 2010). These concerns have been raised by a number of thinkers sharing a broadly humanist orientation.

### ***Conceptualising instrumentalism***

Instrumentality, as a type of student disposition, has been implicitly defined in the literature as ‘an orientation towards the twinned consequences of good jobs and earnings from having a degree’ that can influence decisions about going to university, the choice of what to study, and how to engage in the learning process whilst at university (Budd 2016:3). Students acting instrumentally, or acquisitively, invest their time, money and effort in order to obtain the knowledge and credentials necessary for competing in the labour market, and may be susceptible to Dore’s (1976) ‘diploma disease’ – the practice of framing learning as the means of certification for work. One foundation for current thinking on instrumentalism might be Eric Fromm’s distinction between learning as *having* and learning as *being*. Whilst Fromm’s work pre-dates many of the major changes to HE provision described above, it provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding student orientations to learning. Learning as

being, in its un-commodified form, is a transformative process. In this mode students do not simply memorise and store knowledge but are affected and changed by their learning. They are not 'passive receptacles of words and ideas' but are occupied and interested by the topic; 'they listen, they *hear*, and most important they *receive* and *respond* in an active, productive way' (Fromm 1979:38). Importantly, students in this mode relate lecture material to their own thinking processes and new ideas and perspectives 'arise in their minds' (*ibid* pp.38).

In contrast, students in the 'having' mode of learning concentrate and listen to what is being said in lectures, but only in order to pass their examinations. They do not absorb the content into their own individual system of thought and are not changed or enriched by it. Instead, the words are stored in 'fixed clusters of thought' and 'the student and the content of the lecture remain strangers to each other except that each student has become the owner of a collection of statements made by somebody else' (*ibid.* pp.37).

It can be argued that this second orientation to learning is reflected in the growing concern for 'value for money' amongst students in a way that is altering their expectations of university (Mok 2005). Indeed, for Miller, the positioning of students as consumers who are compelled to invest vast amounts of time and money into a qualification based on the understanding that it will improve job prospects, means that higher education is becoming less about what students learn and more about what they are worth (1998). Nussbaum also describes an increasingly instrumental view of education in which young people are encouraged to frame their learning as the pursuit of knowledge 'possessions' that 'protect, please and comfort' rather than challenge, transform and deepen understanding' (2010:6). A key marker of instrumental learning might therefore be a fixed and passive orientation to knowledge – the antithesis of the



transformative potential advocated in humanist critiques of contemporary HE. Whilst the *having* and *being* categories have been employed elsewhere by Molesworth *et al.* (2009) in their critique of the marketization of HE, their piece did not include any empirical work.

### ***Research into student dispositions and accounts of higher education***

Existing research into instrumentalism and consumerism in HE suggests a changing relationship between prospective students and universities. Research into personal statements finds some evidence of self-marketing amongst FE students (Shuker 2014) and plagiarism seems to be a growing problem (Paton 2011). In their qualitative study into HE student dispositions, Nixon *et al.* report an ‘overwhelming prevalence of a consumer subjectivity’ (2016:8).

Existing research has also indicated that the levels and types of instrumentalism amongst university students are not always the same. Davies *et al.* (2013) used a survey to explore school leavers’ views, reporting that males and certain ethnic groups were more likely to frame going to university in terms of labour market and income. All groups in this study (almost 1400 students) also identified non-economic factors including creativity and altruism. Similarly, qualitative studies using interviews to explore student views report altruistic, intrinsic *and* instrumental rationales for studying, suggesting that other dispositions mediate instrumentalism amongst students (Jary and Lebeau 2009, Mann 2010; Budd 2016, Tomlinson 2017). In particular, whilst Tomlinson (2017) finds growing identification with consumer-oriented approaches to HE, he argues that students do not universally adopt this position and that many remain ambivalent about dominant marketising discourses in HE.

Criticisms have been made of the narrow economic agenda adopted by governments and policy makers in their framing of university curricula (Abbas *et al.*

2016). However, less is known about how the *content* of different disciplines might impact student experiences or reflect different dispositions. Abbas and colleagues (Abbas *et al.* 2016, Ashwin *et al.* 2014, McClean *et al.* 2015) lead the charge in this burgeoning area, with a longitudinal mixed methods study of four English Sociology departments in institutions occupying different positions in UK league tables. Interviews with Sociology and Criminology students, over the course of their undergraduate degrees, revealed changes in students' accounts of their discipline in terms of how they perceived the relations between themselves, the world and the disciplinary knowledge that they were studying (Ashwin *et al.* 2014:230). The authors also identified a 'sociology-based disciplinary identity' (McClean *et al.* 2015:180) that gave students access to particular pedagogic rights (Bernstein 2000) and transcended institutional hierarchies. This fits with Baillie *et al.*'s (2013) assertion that studying in a particular discipline leads students to develop particular ways of seeing the world. Finding that undergraduates' transformations were affected by the disciplinary knowledge that they encountered, Abbas *et al.* (2016) position Sociology as a potential site for acquiring feminist knowledge and tackling gender equality in society, thereby effecting change not only *within* the student population but *beyond*. These findings suggest a non-instrumental approach to learning developed by Sociology students that is both transformative and potentially emancipatory in character.

Less is known about the subject specific attributes of business school students. There has been some suggestion that trends of instrumentalism are more prevalent amongst those studying Business or Economics degrees (Frank *et al.* 1993). Additionally, given that Business schools have been signposted as the 'testing group' for financial innovations in the HE sector and the associated claim that processes of marketization and bureaucratisation are more accelerated in these departments

(Beverungen et al. 2013), it is reasonable to suggest that those studying Business may be more susceptible to instrumentalised learning. Together, this literature underlines on the importance of developing a more nuanced understanding of the different factors mediating student orientations to learning. Indeed, Ashwin *et al.* advocate developing an international dimension to studies into subject-specific student dispositions ‘in order to understand whether there is variation internationally in undergraduate students’ accounts of what constitutes sociology’ (2014: 230).

### ***Comparing university subjects across national borders***

Building on literature that suggests instrumentalism is more prevalent amongst those studying Business or Economics degrees (Frank *et al.* 1993; Beverungen *et al.* 2013), and that less instrumental capacities like empathy and critical thinking are fostered in the humanities (Nussbaum 2010, Small 2013), this study incorporates a comparison between those studying Business and Sociology. These subjects have been chosen because they can both be considered as somewhat *non-vocational*, in the sense that they are not perceived to train individuals for specific roles (compared to, for example Engineering, or Biotechnology), and so, in theory, support a more open-ended approach to learning that some critics argue is being undermined by a focus on employability. Importantly, whilst the social sciences and humanities have been characterised by some as ‘useless frills’ (Nussbaum 2010) peripheral to economic imperatives, Business studies are largely seen as core to the development of economically ‘useful’ skills. By selecting the groups of students portrayed in the literature as the *most* and *least* instrumental, the possibility of capturing a range of student attitudes and understandings is maximised.

By adding an international comparator, it is also possible to contrast student dispositions across national borders. Despite a shared interest in increasing overall

student numbers in the pursuit of knowledge economies, policy makers in Britain and Singapore have approached higher education governance from two very different vantage points. In Singapore, since independence in 1965, ideas about national productivity and prosperity have been central to the development of education systems, and as such their functioning has been carefully framed according to economic imperatives (Green *et al.* 1999). This ‘developmental’ (Johnson 1982) approach has led to a strong positive connection between the supply of graduates and demand for them in the labour market (Green *et al.* 1999). Conversely, in Britain, where universities have long existed without a strong connection to ideas about the strength of the economy, the contemporary HE landscape represents a significant shift in the goals and organisation of HEIs (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012). As a result, Britain has a more diverse collection of cultural understandings about the role of HE when compared to Singapore, where strong normative values have been mobilised in the service of economic development (Chua 1995). In addition, whilst Singapore has maintained centralised control over its HEI provision, Britain is moving towards further marketization and privatisation in the higher education sector and shifting the burden of university funding towards a user-pays model (McGettigan 2013).

The UK education system has historically provided liberal arts courses and programmes that are less compatible with immediate market demands, but may contribute indirectly to the development of critical and creative knowledge workers (Holmwood 2011). Ironically, the initial focus on engineering and scientific subjects in Singapore has recently been relaxed to allow degrees in the humanities and the arts, and whilst the Ministry of Education has been expanding the choice of creative courses available to students to plug this perceived gap, in Britain concerns have been raised about the diminished funding for, and declining importance ascribed to, humanities

subjects compared to those which are more closely linked to ‘economic and technical imperatives’ (Gewirtz and Cribb 2012:67). It might be expected therefore that students in Singapore offer more instrumental dispositions than those in Britain, given the broader cultural legacy of universities and the less direct “learning equals earning” link.

## **Methodology**

The empirical data presented in this paper are drawn from a wider study into the way that the public and private benefits of higher education are viewed by final year students studying in Britain and Singapore (Muddiman 2015). This comparative case-study entailed qualitative semi-structured interviews with four groups of final year undergraduate students, studying either Business or Sociology at a HEI in Britain or Singapore. The two host institutions chosen for this study were matched as closely as possible according to their size and international reputation, but they are not named here in order to protect the identities of participants. Students were recruited via emails, lecture ‘shout-outs’ and word of mouth, in a self-selecting sample<sup>1</sup>. In Britain, I interviewed 19 home students (9 male, 10 female) studying in the field of Sociology (n=9) or Business (n=10)<sup>2</sup> during the academic year 2011-12. In Singapore, I interviewed 21 students (10 male, 11 female) studying Sociology (n=10) or Business (n=11) over six weeks (autumn 2011). Participants were asked about their experiences of university, approaches to learning, views on political and social issues, plans for post-graduation and personal aspirations.

The education systems in Britain and Singapore follow an almost identical structure in terms of key stages, but an entrance exam for all students at secondary level in Singapore selects pupils for different types of school. Universities in both locations have similar modular courses and draw on similar curricular for modular courses,

delivered via large lectures and smaller interactive seminars. Assessment is via exams, written coursework, and group projects and presentations. When these data were collected, prior to the introduction of the £9000 top up fees for British students, tuition fees were roughly the same at both institutions, at around £3500 per annum. There are over 150 HEIs in Britain (Paton 2014), whilst in Singapore there are only a handful of 'autonomous' state-run institutions<sup>3</sup>, flanked by a number of private degree-providers and the branch campuses of foreign tertiary institutions. The proportion of young people in higher education in 2012 was slightly higher in the UK at 38 percent (ONS 2013) compared to 27 percent in Singapore (Yung 2012). However, when self-financed degrees from local and overseas universities are taken into consideration this proportion is much higher, with the MOE reporting that in 2011, 46 percent of economically-active Singaporean residents aged 25-29 were degree holders (2012). Cross-national comparisons are becoming increasingly prominent in social research (O'Reilly 1996) and are both 'attacked as impossible and defended as necessary' (Livingstone 2003:477). I took an emic position in which the theoretical and empirical differences between the two research sites *informed* the collection and analysis of data (Carmel 1999). This holistic interpretivist approach allowed for the consideration of cases as configurations of characteristics (Ragin 1987) and the recognition of educational processes as deeply embedded in social and cultural processes. The study received ethical approval from the Cardiff University Ethics Committee.

## **Findings**

There were some universal features present in all participants' accounts. For example, university was regarded by all as a 'natural progression' regardless of national context or subject allegiance. This framing of going to university as a *no-brainer* or 'non-

decision' has been noted elsewhere (Budd 2016), and suggests that these students are 'embedded choosers' (Reay *et al.* 2005). Similarly, all of the participants emphasized the importance of becoming more employable in their accounts. However, those studying Sociology in both national contexts were more likely to value aspects of their university education that were not linked to future employment. Indeed, whilst national differences emerged in other aspects of these students' accounts – including their post-graduation plans for seeking employment – when talking about their dispositions towards, and experiences of, university, subject allegiance took centre stage. That being said, not *all* Business students gave entirely instrumental accounts, and not *all* Sociology students could be described as having non-instrumental orientations to learning at university. Like the students in Budd's (2016) research, the participants in this study drew on a wide range of factors when accounting for their experiences, expectations and understandings of university. What follows is an exploration of the key characteristics of the accounts of students studying Business or Sociology.

***Business Students and 'having' a degree: going to university to become more employable***

Participants studying Business in both Britain and Singapore framed going to university primarily in terms of becoming more employable. They almost unanimously agreed that the primary purpose of higher education is to prepare individuals for the labour market. Whilst the Singaporean Business students in Singapore generally had a strong sense of how the knowledge they were developing would be applied in the labour market, the British Business students tended to focus less on specific skills and knowledge, and valued the generic degree credential instead.

The Singaporean Business students viewed education as a deliberate investment in 'useful' skills and knowledge. In tune contemporary HE policy in both locations,

these students primarily talked about the value of their degree in terms of the skills it had equipped them with and how these would be useful moving forward into the labour market. Their primary motivation for doing well at university was the prospect of future employment. For example, Ray said that ‘ever since year one’ he had pushed himself ‘really hard’ to get good grades, ‘fuelled by the strive to get a good job’. Similarly, Isobel said that grades are an important indicator that you will ‘prove to be a worker who can deliver’. Education was therefore framed almost exclusively by these students as a means of maximising employment potential. Most of these students studying Business also framed university as a vehicle transporting them to an already agreed-upon destination:

That’s what they have been teaching us really since the start, the interview process, the application process, things like etiquette courses, grooming courses, communication course, what to say, what not to say (Ben, Singapore).

It’s important to know what I want to get out of a job first, and then do university education in line with what I want to get out of a career (Val, Singapore)

In line with Nussbaum’s (2010) assertion that a focus on employability dissuades students from studying degrees that don’t appear to directly contribute to future job prospects, all of these students described using detailed information about the status of different occupations, and national statistics on employment prospects for graduates from different disciplines, to inform their choice of degree and subsequent module selections. For example, Vernon explained that accountancy is a good choice ‘because it’s a lot easier to get a job after you graduate’ compared to subjects in the humanities which have ‘a much lower employment rate’. Business was generally regarded as a subject with a ‘safer’ return on the time and effort students put in to their education compared to arts subjects.



The British Business students were much less directed in their approach to university, but most agreed that ‘ultimately people at a fundamental level go to uni to get a good job’ (Jess). They were concerned with obtaining the degree qualification rather than building up particular skillsets relevant to specific jobs, and like the students studied by Nixon *et al.* (2016), many viewed the degree as a ‘label’ that marks you out to potential employers. The British Business students therefore approached their learning as a type of ‘defensive expenditure’ (Brown *et al.* 2011). Echoing the English students in Budd’s (2016) study, these participants believed that a 2:1 grade would be enough to satisfy potential employers, and tailored their learning practices accordingly. This entailed structuring their learning to ensure as little ‘leakage’ or time wasted learning things that would not ultimately contribute to assessments:

I don’t really want to learn stuff that I don’t need to know (Mike, UK).

[...] if you can get away with doing half the work and you’re still going to do just as well then it makes no sense to do all that revision’ (Glynn, UK)

Unlike their Singaporean counterparts, these students didn’t seek to differentiate themselves from others in their peer group. However, they did share the Singaporean Business students’ framing of university as the clearest route to gaining high-level employment, defining success according to employability, and unanimously believing that the primary role of HE is to allow graduates to manoeuvre advantageously in the labour market.

Various elements of these students’ accounts align with Fromm’s *learning as having*. They hinted at Business students’ desire for ‘value for money’ and for controllable and predictable knowledge (Fromm 1979) that reinforced and facilitated their career ambitions and minimised discomfort (Nussbaum 2010). In framing the degree qualification as a predictable end goal and ticket to enhanced job prospects,

these students spoke very much about ‘having’ knowledge possessions that could be traded in for favourable graduate positions, and seemed to undermine the potential for transformational learning experiences at university. Although both groups of students studying Business prioritised instrumental accounts of their learning and orientations to university, that broadly fit with Fromm’s characterisation of learning in the having mode, it is notable that the Singaporean students were less ‘passive’, especially in their accounts of preparing for the graduate labour market, when compared to the British Business students. This suggests that there can be different variations of the *learning as having* orientation.

***Sociology students and ‘being’ at university: going to university to broaden horizons***

In contrast to those studying Business, Sociology participants in both Britain and Singapore did not entirely share the view that the main purpose of going to university is to become more employable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the content of their degrees, almost all were critical of what they saw as the ‘official’ framing of higher education and argued for a more holistic understanding of education in terms of fostering human potential and enabling young people to be more critical and analytical. For example, Rudy (Singapore) was critical that ‘it’s a really taken for granted fact that education is something for employability’ and Steve complained that ‘everything is about gearing you to the workforce’. Brigit criticised the fact that ‘personal exploration’ is ‘side-lined’ by the ‘need to get a good degree to get a good job’. Similarly, Sadie (Singapore) said that education shouldn’t be seen solely ‘in terms of future employment’ but also in terms of ‘human potential’. Like the advocates of the public university, she argued that education should empower individuals to learn how to solve problems, to think

critically, and to 'build people up to be aware of others around them' and of 'issues in the world' (Sadie).

The Sociology students in this study emphasized the open-endedness of their learning and the value of encountering new and unanticipated ideas. Many said that they become more critical, self-aware, and better able to understand social inequalities as a direct consequence of what they had learned. For example, Alice (UK) said 'you look at things more critically' and consider 'where power is coming from'. Similarly Bridget said that her studies had helped her to consider different perspectives:

[...] you take on the views of others; you really start hearing what other people think.

Most of these students described a change in their mind-set as a result of both the mode of learning and the substantive content of their course. They spoke about becoming more tolerant and altruistic. For example Bridget (Singapore) said that by being 'forced' to confront distressing issues like poverty and starvation, she felt compelled to: 'be a better person...treat other people better, to understand what's happening to them and to offer help in...whatever way I can'. These students' accounts are in concert with the educational ideals put forward by Robbins (1963), Barnett (1997) and others. They also support Nussbaum's assertions that studying Sociology can potentially make students more 'social' – more open-minded and interested in others around them.

The majority of students in this group were also much more able to identify benefits of learning at university that went beyond becoming employable, compared to the Business students. Female Sociology students in both Britain and Singapore said that their course had enhanced their understanding of gender politics. This included feeling more empowered in their own personal relationships. For example, Sadie

(Singapore) had become determined that in the future she would expect that she and a future partner would have 'equal roles'. These experiences were described as emancipatory, and tended to be more of a revelation in Singapore where normative cultural ideas about gender are more traditional (e.g. see Hodal 2013). Whilst the male participants in Singapore weren't able to apply these insights into their own lives in the same way, many spoke about revising their own views and approaching personal relationships differently. These themes were not present amongst the male British Sociology students.

Many students in this group also spoke about enjoying the learning process, emphasizing the importance of having freedom to think and open their minds to new ideas. So whilst they were partially motivated by the idea of getting a graduate job, most were also motivated by a sense of 'personal satisfaction' (Felix, Singapore) or curiosity:

I think it's just the pleasure of knowing something new...the spark when...you've read something interesting then you can relate it to society, it's just very interesting (Rudy, Singapore).

It was common for the students studying Sociology to report that they had become less instrumental and discovered a different motivation to study whilst at university. For example, Felix described how his desire to work hard had shifted from being 'merely based on grades' to 'genuinely wanting to learn more'. It was clear in the British Sociology students' accounts that the majority thought their degree would be beneficial to them *regardless* of what kind of job they got afterwards. These accounts of students studying Sociology in Britain and Singapore chime well with Fromm's learning as being, in that they describe transformation, disruptions to previously held beliefs and outlooks, and engagement with a range of ideas that could be applied in their own lives and enrich their own systems of thought.

Although becoming employable didn't feature heavily in the Sociology students' accounts of the value of higher education, they were all, to a greater or lesser extent, hoping that their degree would make them more employable. Some were optimistic that their analytical and critical skills would be attractive to employers, but others were less confident. For example, Brigit (Singapore) suggested that whilst 'sociology is useful in helping us understand society at large'; it is probably not as useful as 'a banking or engineering degree' in the workplace. For some, faced with contemplating their next steps, the lack of a clear vocational link between Sociology and a particular career path was unsettling. As a result, some students were worried about finding employment after university and said that perhaps they might have been better off studying a subject like Business. This view was especially prevalent amongst British participants when they were asked to consider whether they would have studied something different had they been eligible to pay increased tuition fees.

## **Discussion**

### ***'Having' and 'being' at university***

My empirical evidence suggests that when it comes to students' orientations to learning at university, subject-based differences are more pronounced than national differences. Whilst those studying Business took a largely instrumental approach to learning *for certification*, and discussed no aspects of transformative or integrative learning that altered their systems of thought or worldview, those studying Sociology were able to account for non-instrumental elements of their learning experience as transformative. Sitting alongside accounts of needing to become employable, these students described enjoying the learning experience, developing critical abilities and changing their worldview as a consequence. Whilst the Business students in both countries broadly

fitted the learning as having orientation – those in Singapore were less ‘passive’, especially when it came to preparing for the graduate labour market. This suggests that there can be different variations of the *learning as having* orientation. Those studying Sociology gave accounts that fit well with Fromm’s description of learning as being, as a transformative and emancipatory experience, but was tinged with the same concerns of ‘value for money’ and onward progression of the Business students. So, whilst not entirely absent from their accounts, the type of instrumentalism attributed to the British and Singaporean Sociology students is less total or all-encompassing than the approaches of the British and Singapore Business students. It is striking that subject allegiance seems to be a key explanatory factor in the contrasting accounts of these students’ orientations to university and learning experiences in spite of the national social and cultural differences described in this paper. Indeed, the fact that similarities according to subject allegiance were echoed across national borders strengthens the assertion that there is something discernible about the disciplines themselves, or the students attracted to studying them. What follows is a discussion of the differential prominence of dispositions aligned with instrumentalism according to subject disposition.

### ***Student, subject and (non) transformations***

There are a number of ways to interpret the significance of subject allegiance in these students’ dispositions, and it is vital to consider whether it is the content of the degree course, or the individual who is attracted to studying it, that is the driver of these different dispositions. Whilst this study wasn’t longitudinal and didn’t seek to explore change over time, it is telling that a transformational element was notable in the Sociology students’ accounts - just like those studied by Ashwin *et al.* (2014) - and absent in Business students’ accounts. There is some evidence in the Sociology

students' accounts of feeling critical of 'the system' prior to choosing their degree. However for others, Sociology was positioned as a default or second choice because they had failed to achieve the grades necessary to get into a 'well-respected' degree course. There is also strong evidence amongst the Sociology students in both countries that studying Sociology helped them to develop new ideas and moved their learning practices away from acquisitive learning: many spoke about a transformative experience of changing views or becoming more aware of different perspectives. Changed perspectives were less evident amongst the Business students in each national context. These students tended to talk about how the substantive material of their course confirmed their worldviews. A minority of British and Singaporean Business students described an affinity with Business prior to commencing their degree; however, the majority spoke about their choice in terms of 'playing it safe'. Business was regarded by these students as a pragmatic and practical way to maximise their employment opportunities upon graduation. It is therefore plausible to suggest that those who take a predominantly instrumental approach to their learning might be more inclined to study Business or Science-related courses than Arts/Humanities courses.

It might be tempting to suggest that the contrast in these participants' dispositions can be fully explained by disciplinary knowledge (Abbas et al. 2016). However, many critiques of contemporary trends in HE come from academics working in Business schools (e.g. Beverungen *et al.* 2013, Dallyn *et al.* 2015). In fact, both host institutions run undergraduate modules on corporate social responsibility and business ethics that include elements of precisely these critiques. It is not the case, then, that business students enrol on 'get rich quick' schemes: they *are* exposed to critiques of instrumentalism, but it seems that this exposure may not prompt students to change or challenge their own framing of learning. This suggests that the perspectives students

arrive at university with – in terms of what university is for and how to engage with it – may structure their learning experiences in particular ways. In this context, it is particularly telling that those in the British Sociology cohort of this study reported that they would have been moved to consider studying for more ‘economically useful’ degrees, had they been subject to the increased tuition fees implemented the following year. It is somewhat troubling that some of these Sociology students expressed ‘buyer’s remorse’ about the market value of their degree credential as they approached graduation, and implies that elements of contemporary arrangements in HE and the perceived pressure to become employable may colonise non-instrumental aspects of student dispositions and experiences, and restrict opportunities for transformative learning.

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the importance of subject choice in understanding student dispositions. It also suggests that differences according to subject choice may be more pronounced than national differences. The importance of subject in facilitating particular ways of seeing the world is often ignored in policy evaluations of the quality of degrees (Abbas *et al.* 2012), but is an important aspect of student experience. When seeking to understand student motivations and dispositions, therefore, we shouldn’t underestimate the importance of subject allegiances. There are a number of limitations to the study: the sample size is small, levels of attainment were not considered, and the study was not longitudinal and so could not map changes over time. The inclusion of just one HEI institution in each country limits the extent to which these participants’ accounts can be seen to speak for the experiences of other students – in particular, those who are not ‘embedded choosers’ (Reay *et al.* 2005). However, this study does highlight the value of international comparison in making visible the importance of



subject allegiance in a way that seems to transcend national context, and indicates that the depths and types of instrumentalism are not the same amongst different student groups. The comparative element of this study has allowed these issues to be drawn in sharper relief. At the heart of this study is a consideration of the countervailing challenges and pressures facing today's university students. At a time when the economic fortunes of graduates in the UK, and elsewhere, are far from secure, and as HE sector and shifting the burden of university funding towards a user-pays model (McGettigan 2013), it is vital that we understand how students understand and engage with their own education and respond to the pressures of becoming employable.

## **Endnotes**

1. This self-selecting sample is discussed in further detail in Muddiman 2015 pp.72-75.
2. In Britain this included a small number of joint honours students and one student studying criminology and social policy. There is considerable module overlap with sociology programmes for students on this degree course. In Singapore those students studying business included those studying joint honours with accountancy, or with a subspecialty in hospitality and tourism management. Whilst it is recognised that there will be some variation within these samples according to specific degree programme, for the purposes of this project those studying within the social sciences discipline are referred to as Sociology students, and those studying Business-related degrees are referred to as business students.
3. At the time of research these were the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University. More recently, the Singapore University of Technology and design and Singapore Institute of Technology have been launched.

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